

ROLES OF FEEDBACK TO OVERCOME GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN EFL CLASS

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Abstract: Grammar still becomes one, among other factors, that contributes a serious problem for students to write in EFL classes but which component is said to be the cause needs a careful study. This article is written to identify the components that trouble them the most and to find out ways of solution. In this article, eight grammatical components were identified, including (1) consistency of subject and verb tenses, (2) consistency of singular and plural nouns, (3) parallel construction, (4) tautologies and redundancies, (5) misplaced modifiers, (6) faulty references, (7) passive construction, (8) choice of verb forms. Data were collected from students' free writing. For this purpose, they were asked to write essays before and after feedbacks were given. The feedbacks consisted of various class activities, such as formative tests, peer reviews, teacher notes, and class discussion. Using dependent paired t-test, scores from both writing tasks were compared to see the difference. In addition to such quantitative computation, a qualitative analysis was also made to find out reasons how and why students encountered grammatical problems in writing. The research reveals the findings, such as (1) all respondents encounter problems about the eight identified grammatical components; two of which are severe, (2) frequencies of such arising problems vary from one student to another, (3) interference of native language, Indonesian grammar, is suspected to be the contributing factors to affect students' quality writing, (4) individual feedback and classroom discussions turn out to be an effective way to improve students' writing, (5) there is significantly different achievement of students in writing before and after feedback.

Keywords: *feedback, grammar, trouble, academic writing*

Introduction

Factors Affecting Quality Writing

Success or failure of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is affected by several factors which might crop up under two main headings; internal and external. The first relates to and is determined by individual learners, such as motivation, attitude, and learning strategies whereas the latter refers to any factors coming from outside the individuals; one among other things mostly involves teaching and learning contexts (Johnson, 2006). In a broader sense other researchers view from other angles and therefore come up with different propositions. Alsayed (2003) claims there are five contributing variables to affect success in learning EFL, such as motivation, early exposure to English, attitude, early first language acquisition, and social background. Similarly, Renandya (2013) points out eight factors, which to a large extent are within the control of classroom teachers. Such affecting factors include roles of input, output fluency, formulaic expression, motivation, grammar, vocabulary, and amount and intensity of instruction. With respect to the role of grammar in language teaching teachers agree that it is an essential part as far as language learning and teaching is concerned. Such is possible because learning a language can't take place without learning its grammar (Renandya, 2013). However teaching too much grammar tends to be ineffective, therefore it is suggested that teachers select grammar items based on, at least, two considerations: comprehensibility and acceptability (Swan, 2002).

in teaching writing, Windschuttle and Windschuttle (1988) declare two issues to fulfill so that an essay might be socially accepted and categorized as an elegant piece of manuscript. They are referred to as consistency and precision. The first deals with the stability to always adhere to grammatical rules and the latter is about accuracy in arranging words and phrases for clarity to avoid ambiguity. They clarify and break them down into following grammar items, such as (1) consistency between sentence subjects and their predicates, related with plural or singular forms of nouns and the rules of tenses applicable in English grammar, (2) consistency in term of sequence of words and phrases in parallel forms, (3) misplaced pronouns, (4) misplaced and misrelated subjects, (5) misplaced modifiers, (6) tautology and redundancies, and (7) unnecessary words and phrases to ensure comprehensibility and acceptability. Balley (2002) claims there are five grammar items to teach, such as (1) parallelism, (2) pronoun agreement, (3) fused sentences, (4) passive construction, and (5) verbal - a correct choice of verb forms to appear in a sentence when such is preceded by another verb.

Based on the above description, this article identifies eight grammar components to monitor the accuracy, comprehensibility, and acceptability of students' essays in writing class. To synthesize it, the eight components are described below;

1. Consistency of subject and verb tenses
2. Consistency of plural and singular forms
3. Consistency of parallel construction
4. Tautologies and redundancies
5. Misplaced modifiers
6. Misplaced pronouns or faulty references
7. Passive construction
8. Choice of verb forms

Roles of Feedback

There is ample evidence that feedback is very powerful to influence learning achievement. It falls in the fifth of ten highest influences on achievement (Hattie, 1999, Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Such is possible to be articulated in a form of formative test to determine the way forward, and to improve and accelerate learning (Ramaprasad, 1983; Harlen & James, 1997; Sadler, 1998 as cited by Black and William, 1998). For that purpose three conditions should be fulfilled, such as that students must (1) possess a concept of goal or reference level being aimed for, (2) compare the actual level of performance with that goal or standard, and (3) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap (Sadler, 1998).

Despite the fact that feedback contributes positive impacts on EFL writing, there has been a long and prominent debate about it (Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Ferris, 1999; Chandler 2003, as cited by Bitchener, Young, and Cameron, 2005). Truscott (1996), in particular, argued that grammar correction in (L2) writing classes should be abandoned, for three reasons: ineffective, none to be helpful, and harmful effect. Nevertheless, Ferris, et.al., (2013) claimed that students in writing class found written corrective feedbacks, followed by one-to-one discussion about errors, useful and therefore teachers should take a more finely tuned approach to corrective feedback. Not to mislead with the above debate, I come up with conviction that a study to investigate a formative test and its role as feedback is important.

Methodology

This mixed method research was conducted using a sequential explanatory design in which qualitative data were used to enhance, complement, and follow up quantitative finding (Creswell, 2008). There were 30 students taking Academic Writing subject from whom data were collected. The quantitative data were collected from students' pieces of English free writing before and after feedbacks were given. Using a holistic scoring rubric to indicate scales from 1 to 4, two lecturers acting as raters were involved to score students' essays. Since the two raters scored each student's pretest and posttest essays, each student had two scores of pretest and posttest. Therefore, a simple computation of mean score was applied to get a single score of each student's pretest and posttest. Data were analyzed using a dependant paired t-test formula. This is to confirm if there is significant difference between mean scores of pretest and that of posttest. With respect to qualitative research activities, an analysis of theoretical concepts of Grammar of Bahasa Indonesia was made. This, in particular, related with the eight grammar components which were studied in the research. The qualitative data were collected from students' essay writing of the same tests from which qualitative analysis was made.

Result and Discussion

Result

Out of eight grammar components being studied, most students made errors about consistency of subject-verb agreement (83.3%) and consistency of plural-singular forms (76.6%). Table 1 below shows the details.

Table 1. Percentage of students making errors in 8 components of grammar

No	Grammar Components	No. Students Making Error	%
1	Consistency subject-verb tenses	25	83.3
2	Consistency plural-singular forms	23	76.6
3	Consistency parallel construction	13	43.3
4	Tautologies & Redundancies	15	50.0
5	Misplaced modifiers	3	10.0
6	Misplaced & Faulty references	6	20.0
7	Passive Construction	5	16.6
8	Choices of verb forms	12	40.0

From the quantitative analysis the research significantly proved that the null hypothesis was rejected, meaning that there was a significant difference between mean scores of pretest and that of posttest ('p' value = .000 < .001).

Discussion

From the aspect of quantitative finding, as presented above, the difference between mean scores of pretest and posttest is significantly apparent but a thorough discussion should be made to find out if it relates to and is caused by formative test, which in particular functions as corrective feedback in EFL writing. Such is crucial bearing in mind that the long and prominent debate related to Truscott's argument and Ferris' as is still continuing (Truscott, 1996). However, it is convincing to quote what has been concluded by Bitchener, Young, and Cameron that direct oral feedback in combination with direct written feedback had a greater effect than direct written feedback alone. Consequently, they suggested that second language (L2), including EFL, writing teachers provide their learners with both oral and written feedback on the more treatable types of linguistic error (Bitchener, Young, and Cameron, 2005).

With respect to the qualitative data, particularly about reasons why students encounter severe grammar problems in the two aspects of consistency of plural and singular forms, and consistency of subject - verb tenses it is inevitably true to claim that interference of first language (L1), *Bahasa Indonesia*, becomes the main cause.

In *Bahasa Indonesia* plural nouns are formed in three ways, i.e., either by reduplicating the noun, or by adding numerical words, or by adding quantifiers (Nugraha, 2010). It is interesting to note that *Bahasa Indonesia* applies a rule of 'either - or principle', meaning to say that the three ways of pluralization are applied interchangeably not concurrently. In contrast, the plural nouns of English are mostly formed by applying inflectional morpheme -s which is concurrently applied with all other plural markers, such as numerical words, and quantifiers. This basic rule is not found in all languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, (O'Grady et.al., 2009).

Conclusion

The research reveals a generic conclusion that feedback results in a positive contribution toward quality writing in EFL class, particularly in the aspect of grammar. This is significantly shown by empirical finding that mean scores after feedback is higher than that before it. Statistically such is shown by 'p' value which is smaller than .001 ('p' value = .000 < .001).

In addition, I found my students in academic writing class both enthusiastic to join the class discussion and contented, as well, to receive feedbacks from both the lecturer and their peers. This is to say that combination of written feedback in the form of formative test and oral feedback articulated in class discussion as well as teacher comment is useful to enhance quality writing, particularly from the aspect of grammar. Such is shown by class attendance which could be highly maintained, up to 95% in every session. This confirms that the writing class is active and interactive as well as attractive.

Qualitatively this research confirms that EFL students in my writing class encounter grammatical problems in all eight aspects discussed in this article, in which their problems vary from one grammar aspect to the other. Most students encounter severe problems in two aspects: consistency of plural and singular forms of noun, and consistency of subject and verb tenses. Such is mainly caused by interference of L1 which contrastively apply different rules as far as grammar is concerned.

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